



Photo by Rae Mack

"Why Are You Painting the Windows?"

By LCdr. Michael Carambas
Safety Officer
VAW-117

Having just returned from a six-month deployment to the Arabian Gulf, I was ready to return to my peaceful life and homestead in Norfolk. The fly-in went as planned, and all four E-2Cs returned safely. As we shut down the aircraft, our spouses were on the flight line, waiting in anticipation. The reunions were joyful—almost making up for the time away. After all the pleasantries, we headed home. As we pulled into the garage, my wife handed me my “honey-do” list.

Because I had received orders to Washington, D.C., and we needed to sell our house and move, the list was longer than normal.

My wife’s number-one task for me was to paint our bedroom. After gathering the supplies, I remembered I didn’t own a respirator. During deployment, while serving as aircraft division officer, I sat in on divisional hazmat training. My corrosion branch stressed the importance of wearing respirators while painting, especially in the confined spaces of a

hangar deck. As the Div O, I listened to the lecture, but since I never had to paint an aircraft, I didn't really learn the lesson.

The day I chose to paint was raw and windy, so I closed the windows to keep out the draft. I cleaned the walls before I primed all the surfaces. Opening the can of primer, I ignored the warning that the room should be well ventilated. I noticed a strong smell coming from the can, but the more I used the primer, the less I noticed the smell. It got to the point that I didn't even smell it anymore. I was beginning to feel euphoric over how quickly the job was going and how well I was doing.

Wanting to keep up the momentum and get the job done quickly, I pressed on with the painting. I started with the baseboards and trim. Initially, it went very smooth, but I noticed my vision was beginning to blur. Next, I broke out the sprayer and started on the walls. I noticed the room was getting warmer than it was before, but I kept at it. I wanted to get this job finished.

It was becoming difficult to paint straight, and I was starting to see bright spots on the wall. I felt like I was in a high-altitude trainer in flight school.

[Author's note: In that trainer, you are exposed to lower levels of oxygen, which produces hypoxia. You tend to lose your ability to concentrate, and your coordination suffers.]

I was still working on the wall when my wife opened the door and said, "Honey, are you all right?" As soon as she opened that door, I felt the rush of fresh air, and my head began to clear. She continued, "I could smell the paint downstairs. Why do you have the windows closed? And why did you just paint the window?"

Sure enough, I looked at the window I had sprayed with paint. The fumes from the primer and paint had overcome me, and my "professional" job had become a disaster.

I'm not sure what would have happened if my wife hadn't been home during my painting fiasco. I didn't apply any risk management to the task. I ignored the various warnings and didn't try to control or correct the situations that caused my over-exposure to paint fumes. Now when I sit through maintenance training, I pay special attention to the hazmat portion. Also, I bought a respirator to include in my home-painting gear. ■

[Note: After receiving this story, I called a paint distributor and asked if latex paint could have this effect on a person. I thought only oil-based paints caused the type of condition the author had. To my surprise, the paint technician said that latex paints have an ammonia base and that they can cause these effects if you don't ventilate the space you are working in. That's why they put that warning on the label.—Ed.]

A Conversation With Mom

One of our Safety Center staffers relayed this telephone conversation he had with his mother recently. He asked that his name not be mentioned because he sends this magazine to his mother and doesn't want her to know he ratted on her.

"Mom, what's that annoying beeping I'm hearing in the background?"

"Oh, that carbon-monoxide alarm you gave me is broken."

"I bought that only a couple of years ago. What do you mean, it's broken?"

"Well, it started beeping the other day. I thought it needed a new battery, so I went into town and bought one. Those things are expensive, you know. It's still beeping, even after I put in the new one. So I think the alarm is broken."

"Mom, you need to get your furnace and hot-water heater looked at. Not only that, you need to turn them off for the night."

"Why?"

"Because you've probably got a leak somewhere, and you need someone to look at them."

"I just had the furnace worked on. You'd think the repairman would have noticed if something was broken. Besides, the furnace and the heater are working just fine."

"Maybe, but you need to get them looked at right away."

Mom finally agreed, and the next morning a repairman came out. He found that the last repairman hadn't reconnected the exhaust vent properly, so gas was venting inside.

I was happy that I had bought my mom the alarm and even happier I'd convinced her to trust it. ■